

Children Living in Sustainable Built Environments: New Urbanisms, New Citizens

Pia Christensen, Sophie Hadfield-Hill, John Horton and Peter Kraftl (2018)
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This book is perhaps one of the first of its type: the authors have undertaken a broad, interdisciplinary approach to understanding the daily life, activities, and inclusion of children (aged 9-16) in sustainable communities. The authors successfully employ mixed-methods research, integrating quantitative methods such as GPS device mapping with qualitative tools such as photographs, observations, interviews, and community-building workshops. The goal for the research is to investigate the multiple ways children's lives are (and are not) recursively *produced* in, through, and with the everyday lives of sustainable urbanism. The book draws its primary inference from a study of 250 people, primarily children (part of the research project called New Urbanisms, New Citizens) and youth in four newly built sustainable communities in the United Kingdom. The research resonates with the contemporary approach to childhood studies, in which children are treated as interconnected social actors and, sometimes, participants and co-researchers who have the power to bring change to their community—and through cultural and societal processes, change within themselves as well.

The book has a well-defined, three-part structure: investigating experiences of youth and children, implications of their participation in community building, and finding empirical data to facilitate the building of sustainable communities, especially from the perspective of children. In setting the context, there is no reference to the communities in the broader geographic context. This keeps the location of the study area obscured from readers. The theoretical framework of the book emerges out of Prout's (2005) seminal work that emphasizes the heterogeneity of childhood processes. This, as the authors rightly point out, is in direct contradiction with Piaget's theory that children's development is homogeneous based on age.

A thorough literature review in the introductory section of the book establishes the authors' formidable knowledge of the subject. The contemporaneity of the book is revealed through the perspectives of intersectionality and intergenerationality with respect to nonhuman materialities. The authors endeavor to comprehensively present principles and visions of sustainable development from across the globe, including the United Kingdom, North America, and India. This produces a noteworthy cross-fertilization of ideas regarding the context of sustainability and the physical and social dimensions of sustainable communities.

The sustainable community under research uses diverse eco-technologies that the authors find are entangled in the daily lives of the users. The authors' approach of digging deeper into household members', including children's, interactions and daily lived experiences with technology seems to be relatively uncommon. The novel

approach rewarded the authors through findings such as a “taken-for-grantedness” of sustainable technologies among child and adult members of the society; while it is common for the children to be curious about, for example, solar panels, in contrast, the adults easily get frustrated with and even opposed to sustainable technologies.

The authors cover only the walkability aspect of children’s mobility. The book can be appreciated for laying out a brief historical background of the concept of shared streets, including examples of Dutch *woonerfs* and English *home zones*. The study finds the children to be very mobile but within boundaries, mostly specified by their parents. Contrary to the popular belief that shared streets are commonly used by children for play, the authors argue that children do not prefer shared streets unless those spaces have some kind of enclosure. In analyzing the perception of safety in shared streets, the authors point out that lack of signage in shared streets creates a state of confusion for both motorists and children. While this finding may be novel for sustainable communities of the global north, its veracity is debatable for children living in the cities of the global south where there is limited or no signage except on arterial roads.

The study finds significant insights while exploring the roles and experiences of the children as participants in community-making. Interviews with children yield three strings of discussion: how the children form an integral and positive force in welcoming of new neighbors, and thus facilitate interaction among the adults of the community; how the children discover nuances of identity, innovative routes and open up spaces for community use; and how the children themselves, or at times along with their parents, construct issues of exclusion based on socio-economic or class distinctions. It is surprising that even in contemporary communities like the ones in this study, the authors find a lack of policy focus on the everyday lives of children. This finding calls for further research on how urban planners can work more closely with children and use their acquired, everyday knowledge. In the chapter titled “Vital Politics,” the authors argue that the younger population members are often considered to be outsiders, affecting the position of children and youth in the political scenario. This finding reflects the bitter truth of exclusion of children from urban policies that have been discussed previously by eminent authors of children literature like Lynch (1977) and Chawla (2002). The findings in this field are not particularly new, but the authors remind readers of the fact that inclusiveness was an integral part of the vision of the (sustainable) communities in this study.

The authors introduce the context of children and play through a comprehensive historical discussion establishing play as an essential entity and right in a child’s life. This is probably one of the few chapters where the authors go extensively beyond the boundaries of Europe and North America and discuss the state of play from diverse cultures. The book discusses the relationship of public space to children’s play—how the usage of space changes with the advent of children within it, and the impact of public space on social relationships within the community. The authors’ stance on this aspect is an important and rather uncommon one: they argue for “denaturing” the childhood-nature-play triad, not by taking away the

element of nature but by adding openness to the definition of nature and play. They emphasize that development can not be based on play alone unless we accept a broader definition of play that includes a range of opportunities for all the users of a community. Owing to the constant migration of population from rural to urban places where space is getting constricted, this is probably a thought to be contemplated. In conclusion, the authors call for researchers in multidisciplinary fields to work together in understanding the impacts of sustainable communities on children around the globe.

The book presents a good narrative, especially with raw interview data that allows the readers to draw subjective interpretations of the issues. Also, as the book covers a wide range of subjects, we get a holistic view of lives at these sustainable communities through nuanced views from different socio-economic actors. The book's inclusion of essential historical background on various themes (such as children's literature, sustainable development, play, shared streets) allows a novice reader on the subject to comprehend the issues. Being an urban planner and architect myself, I feel there is a definite lack of graphics, specifically when discussing the built environment and design aspect of spaces and streets. Some of the recent works by Carroll and colleagues (2015) and Krishnamurthy (2019) focus on this aspect of the built environment and children's use of contemporary everyday spaces. Although this book at times engages examples from around the globe, the inferences seem to be confined within the geographical and cultural boundaries of the studied environment. They should be tested in the light of diverse socio-cultural aspects.

To conclude, this is a very well-written book and should be read and further built upon by researchers and practitioners from various perspectives of childhood studies, including urban planning, the built environment, and human geography. Overall, the book is thorough in its theoretical framework, methodology, and the nuances of its findings, based on which the authors conclude that there is a hopeful future in the field of childhood studies.

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